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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 001760

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#) [NATIONAL](#) [ASSEMBLY](#)
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY CRISIS CONTINUES - ASSEMBLY WILL
GRILL EDUCATION MINISTER

REF: A. KUWAIT 1590
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 1562

Classified By: Charge Alan Minsenhimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On December 24, Islamist MP Saad Al-Shraye filed a motion to "grill" Minister of Education (and the only remaining female minister) Nouriya Al-Sabeeh. The grilling comes in response to a well-publicized sexual assault at a Kuwaiti primary school, but is more accurately a reflection of Parliament's ongoing contentious relationship with the Government of Kuwait (GOK). Expectations of an impending Amiri decision to dissolve Parliament are running high, which the Amir himself has reinforced through his recent comments and actions. END SUMMARY.

Islamist MP Calls for a Grilling

[1](#)2. (U) On December 24, Islamist MP Saad Al-Shraye filed a motion for the interpellation (i.e. "grilling") of Education Minister Nouriya Al-Sabeeh (the only remaining female minister after the August resignation of then-Health Minister Dr. Masouma Al-Mubarak). In justifying his request, Al-Shraye cited four points: 1) that Al-Sabeeh deliberately misled MPs in responding to an incident of sexual assault on three children at a Kuwaiti primary school; 2) that she showed favoritism in appointments and dismissals at the ministry; 3) that she is responsible for a deteriorating standard of education, and 4) that she failed to rigidly apply gender segregation in schools throughout Kuwait. Al-Shraye will grill the Minister on January 8, which may then lead to a parliamentary no-confidence motion. To pass, the no-confidence motion would require majority support from the 48 elected MPs.

[1](#)3. (C) Saad Al-Shraye is a member of the neo-Islamist group in Parliament, which is anti-government and has opposed Al-Sabeeh as Education Minister since her appointment in March 2007. The neo-Islamists, together with the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM)(i.e. the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood) and the Salafi Islamic grouping, constitute the Islamic Bloc in Parliament. (Note: While the ICM and the Salafis have not yet gone on record as opposing Al-Sabeeh outright, they are likely to support the grilling and a no-confidence vote against the Minister. End note.)

Parliament At Odds With The Government

[1](#)4. (C) Relations between Kuwait's executive branch and Parliament have been consistently tense since the current Amir, Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al Sabah, came to power in January 2006. Parliamentarians have kept the GOK on the

defensive with accusations of corruption and mismanagement, and the GOK's efforts to recapture the initiative have been ineffective. This impasse has produced a series of grillings, both threatened and actual, against government ministers. As a result, five ministers have resigned or been forced out since January 2007.

Ulterior Motives Abound

¶5. (C) A more likely reason for the Minister's grilling, however, is discontent among Islamists over how Al-Sabeeh is running her ministry, which has traditionally been an Islamist stronghold. Al-Sabeeh is an able administrator who worked her way through the ranks of the Education Ministry. She has taken several steps to improve efficiency and accountability there, including removing Islamist cronies, enhancing transparency in university appointments and refusing to dispense special favors on the basis of "wasta." Her actions have enraged the Islamists, who are at the vanguard of parliamentary opposition to her. In addition, the fact that she is a woman, a liberal and that she refuses to wear a head scarf does not sit well with Kuwaiti conservatives in general.

¶6. (C) In a conversation with Poloff on December 5, the Director of Political Relations for the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), Mohammed Al-Dallal, said that his party is unhappy with Al-Sabeeh's centralization of power and appointment of "weak" underlings to implement her program. Apparently Al-Sabeeh has not shared the outline of her reform program with the ICM, despite their repeated requests. He asserted that the ICM attempted to resolve this

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impasse discretely by approaching both Al-Sabeeh and the Prime Minister on separate occasions, but to no avail. Al-Dallal accused Al-Sabeeh of being a technocrat who lacks political acumen, and he expressed frustration with the Prime Minister's lack of leadership in general.

¶7. (C) Liberal MPs such as Mohammed Al-Saqar believe that some parliamentarians are attempting to provoke the Amir into dissolving the National Assembly. Their strategy is continued confrontation with the GOK, an assault on ministers and a general unwillingness to pass critical legislation, so the theory goes. They gamble that the Amir will dissolve Parliament constitutionally, meaning that he must call for new elections within 60 days. This would provide them with an opportunity to make further electoral gains. This gamble would fail, however, if the Amir opted for an unconstitutional dissolution. Under this scenario, the Amir would suspend Parliament for some longer period while he enacted long-pending legislation and amended the constitution to limit Parliamentary prerogatives.

Gender Segregation

¶8. (U) The complete gender segregation of all schools in Kuwait, both public and private, has been a particular point of emphasis among the Islamist MPs recently. Al-Shraye has accused the minister of "undermining the values and morals of society" by not rigidly enforcing this segregation. Islamists have highlighted the undesirable intermingling of the sexes at school functions and parties, to include at least one incident of a co-ed swimming competition that the Islamists found particularly irksome. (Note: The Islamists' gender segregation requirement would also apply to expatriate schools attended by embassy children. The National Assembly's Education Committee is currently reviewing draft legislation to legally require such segregation in all schools, although it appears unlikely to be brought to a vote anytime soon. End note.)

The Amir is "Fed Up"

¶9. (C) Expectations of an Amiri decision to dissolve Parliament have waxed and waned repeatedly over recent months, and are now high and rising. On December 17, Mohammed Al-Dallal told Poloff that the Amir is "fed up" with the political climate in the country. He noted that while this particular grilling is the most recent symptom of a general political malaise, Parliament's consistently combative nature and its unwillingness to do more than constituent pandering had finally convinced the Amir to dissolve the National Assembly. Al-Dallal speculated that the Amir would dissolve Parliament constitutionally.

¶10. (C) According to the UK Ambassador, the Amir was unusually forthright in discussing domestic politics with ME envoy Tony Blair earlier this month. The Amir reportedly took the initiative to list Parliament's deficiencies and lay out the constitutional basis for dissolution, telling Blair: "Don't be surprised if I do it."

¶11. (C) On December 16 Poloff met with Ali Al-Baghli, a former MP and Oil Minister whom the GOK consults on political issues. Al-Baghli said that the Amir recently met with a group of former ministers regarding parliamentary relations, and they unanimously advised him to dissolve Parliament. He said the Amir was "playing it cool" and waiting for public sentiment to completely turn against Parliament prior to dissolving it. Al-Baghli cautioned that the results of a new parliamentary election would be uncertain given recent electoral redistricting. He noted, however, that the conservative Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood were more organized than the liberals, and that Kuwaitis were basically conservative by nature; hinting at potential Islamist electoral gains.

Comment

¶12. (C) Both Islamist MPs and the Amir are likely mindful of the impending POTUS visit as they consider next steps. While the Amir would certainly prefer not to dissolve Parliament on the eve of the visit, Islamists may hope to force his hand so as to portray themselves as "victims" of both the government and the Americans. We expect the GOK to seek a period of quiet to cover the first half of January; but the Amir may

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find that dissolving Parliament is the only way to get even a two-week respite from harsh accusations and grilling demands aimed at his beleaguered ministers. END COMMENT.

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